

Come to California by **HannahBerrie**

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Summary: The Quarry isn't much of a beach, but the Party makes it work and Mike makes some promises. One-shot.

Come to California

Though it's still early in the morning, El can tell it's going to be hot today. There's not a cloud in the sky and all of her neighbors have their sprinklers turned on already. The mechanical whiz of the sprinklers spritzing water at the dried yellow grass accents the impatient sound of El drumming her foot, her flip-flop making satisfying smacks against the pavement.

Where are they? She thinks with a pout. She glances down at her watch, the one Mike had given her so they'd match.

11:31

They're only one minute late, but it's still *late*. Maybe they got lost. Sure, El's lived in her new suburban flat for a couple months now, but maybe they forgot or something. It doesn't seem likely, considering Mike comes to visit her at least once a week, but maybe —

As if to dissuade her worries, the distant sound of whirring bicycle wheels begins to draw near.

El quickly turns her attention to the street corner and sure enough, there they are.

Mike's in the front, leading the parade of bikes (and skateboard). The boys are all sporting swim trunks and t-shirts. Max is in the back and El can't help but admire how easily she's able to keep up with the boys on just her skateboard.

Dustin recently got a bell installed on his bike and as he and the Party bike up to El's driveway, he starts to ring it excitedly.

"El!" Dustin exclaims, still ringing his bell, "Hi!"

El smiles at him, unable to stop herself from bouncing in place as she waves at her approaching friends.

"Dude, stop!" Lucas gripes as the party skids to a stop in El's driveway, "Your bell is annoying."

"It's cool!" Dustin insists, "It's like an alarm!"

"Oh yeah," Max snorts, "Warning: nerd alert!"

The party gets a good laugh out of that one and even Dustin can't help but join in.

Mike turns his attention to his girlfriend (*girlfriend*, the word still seems foreign to him, way too good to be true). "Hey, El!" He beams.

"Hi, Mike!" El beams back.

She's wearing a pair of colorful shorts and a simple white tank top that shows off the navy straps of her swimsuit underneath. She's holding a beach bag full of oddities — when Mike glances into it, he can see that she's brought some practical items (like a towel and sunglasses) and items that he has no clue what she plans on doing with (the latest *TV Guide*, some hairspray, a brand-new pack of AA batteries, and a toothbrush).

"I didn't know what to bring to the beach," El blushing explains, "So, I brought a little bit of everything."

"That's cool!" Mike assures her, "You're just being thoughtful!"

El smiles proudly, to which Lucas and Dustin begin making kissy sounds.

"Oh my god," Max huffs with an eye roll, "You guys are such dweebs!"

"They are!" Lucas laughs, exchanging knowing smirks with Dustin.

"I was talking about *you*, geniuses," Max smiles, nudging Lucas playfully.

There's another round of laughter as El slips the strap of her bag over her shoulder and boards Mike's bike.

When they'd first shared a bike over a year ago, they'd been at the same eye-level. Now, as El wraps her arms around Mike's chest, she realizes she's facing his back.

When did he get so tall?

"You good?" Mike asks, glancing over his shoulder.

El nods and gives Mike a quick squeeze to prove that she's secure.

"Then let's go!" Dustin announces, ringing his bell again, causing Lucas to groan in annoyance.

They pull out of El's driveway and begin to make their way towards the Quarry. El rests her head against Mike's back and closes her eyes in an effort to absorb every last fraction of this moment — the smell of Mike's cotton T-shirt, the hum of cicadas and more sprinklers, the feeling of being *free* with her friends.

She wishes she could stay like this forever.

"So, El," Will begins conversationally as the Party draws nearer to the woods surrounding the Quarry, "Are you excited?"

El opens her eyes and flits them over to Will, who's currently biking beside Mike.

"I am!" She smiles, "The beach sounds like fun!"

"It's not that much of a beach," Lucas admits, "There's no waves or sand, just rocks and dirt."

"Yeah, it kinda blows," Max nods, pumping her leg a few times so she can skate faster, "It's not like the ones in California."

El hesitates. Though she doesn't dislike Max anymore, it's hard to deny that they're not fully comfortable around each other yet. Talking to Max sometimes felt like talking to Mike's Mom or Hopper's work friends — El found herself choosing her words carefully and worrying about her answers to everything. "What are the ones in California like?"

Max's eyes light up as she begins to describe it. "There's huge waves and the water is like, the brightest blue you've ever seen. Plus, it's salt water, not freshwater or whatever you guys call it. You can go surfing, or build sandcastles, or hunt for shells!"

As Max continues to describe the Californian beaches, El's eyes widen in excitement. Of course, she's seen stuff like this on TV, but hearing a firsthand account makes it seem all the more *real*.

"Do you miss California?" Lucas asks suddenly. His voice is taut with a strained concern, and his expression appears worried.

Max pauses. "Sometimes. I mean, I miss my dad, mostly. But I'm glad I moved here, too."

Lucas seems relieved by this, as his shoulders slump and he throws Max a small smile. "I am too."

Dustin gives his bell a ring. "Nerd alert!"

"*That's it!*" Lucas snaps. He turns his bike towards Dustin, but Dustin is already peddling away at high speeds.

"Last one to the Quarry's a nerd!" He calls over his shoulder.

"No fair!" Max huffs.

"Wait up!" Will exclaims, peddling faster.

Mike glances over his shoulder at El. "Hold on!" He grins.

El grins back as Mike hunches over and begins peddling faster. The wind whips through their hair as Mike expertly leads them through the forest trails and for a few moments they're moving so fast it almost feels like they're flying.

Ironically, Dustin arrives to the Quarry last. Evidently, he used up too much of his energy too soon. He sits hunched over his handlebars, panting as the rest of the Party passes by.

"Son of a bitch!" He exclaims breathlessly.

"See ya'!" Lucas exclaims gleefully.

The Party brings their bikes to a stop in a big clearing along the foot of the Quarry. There's a rocky edge that surrounds the water, flanked by a stretch of earth and grass.

"We could make dirt castles," Will jokes, eyeing the shoreline.

Mike, Lucas, and El offer strained laughs. Even though they don't want to, they can't help but think about the last time they were in this very spot.

Sirens, darkness, the body...

Dustin seems to be on the same train of thought. As he rejoins the group, still a little out-of-breath, he looks somewhat apprehensive.

"Are you sure this is where we should hang out?" He asks.

Mike swallows. "It's the only ground area by the Quarry. Everything else is all cliffs and rocks."

"It's okay," Will cuts in, giving them a firm look, "We can stay here."

"Are you sure?" Mike asks, glancing at Will tentatively. He knows that Will hates it when they worry about him like this, but it's basically instinctual. Mike can't help but want to keep his friends safe.

Will nods and gets off his bike for emphasis. "I'm sure!" He declares.

Having Will's approval seems to relieve an unspoken tension that was simmering in the scorching summer air. There's practically an audible sigh of relief as the rest of the group gets off their bikes (and skateboard) and heads closer to the water.

The sun is high in the sky as the Party sets out their towels along the shoreline. El slips off her flip-flops and is surprised to feel that the rocky edge of the Quarry is warm to the touch.

She trains her gaze towards the water, which appears invitingly refreshing on a day like today. The water is still and blue-green in color due to the reflection of the surrounding trees. Thankfully, they're the only people here — El isn't in the mood to awkwardly maneuver her way through conversations with strangers.

She turns to glance back at her friends and realizes they're all getting ready to head into the water. Max has removed her shorts and T-shirt and is now wearing a simple sky-blue swimsuit with a small, electric-

purple palm tree emblem on it. Her brow is furrowed in concentration as she works on tying her hair back in a ponytail.

As El watches, she can't help but feel slightly envious of Max's flowing red hair. She distractedly raises a hand to run it through her own hair, wondering if her hair could ever be that long.

Her gaze moves from Max to the rest of the guys. Dustin's carefully taking off his hat and setting it upon the shirt he's since tossed aside. Will is swaying on the spot in what appears to be either nervousness or excitement, El's not quite sure. Lucas is offering to help Max tie her hair back (to which Max jokingly replies, "So, you're a hairdresser now, Stalker?"), and Mike...

Mike peels his shirt off (it's one of his favorites, one with the *Star Wars* logo on it) and El's jaw drops a little bit.

As Mike tosses the shirt aside, he catches sight of El gaping at him. The reaction causes Mike to both flush in embarrassment and swell with pride. It's not like he's got any real muscles or anything, but if El's impressed, then that's what really matters, right?

El continues to gape, so Mike blushing seeks out her verbal affirmation.

"What?" He asks.

El blinks at him. "You...you just..."

He's left her speechless. Jeez, Mike must look even better than—

"You have so many *freckles*!"

...Oh.

El rushes over to him and peers at Mike's torso, evidently fascinated by the dots scattered across his skin. Her finger traces out paths between his freckles as she makes her way across his chest, shoulders, and arms.

Mike blushes as humility and embarrassment hit him all at once. "Uh, yeah. I got a lot of them, I guess."

"They're pretty," El says simply.

"Thanks," Mike replies, blushing more deeply.

El nods before stepping back to strip down into her own swimsuit. Even though she's wearing a modest one-piece, Mike still finds himself glancing away bashfully. A tiny part of him is paranoid that if he stares too long, Hopper (wherever he is right now) will just *know*, like he'll feel a disturbance in the Force or something.

El notices that Mike is avoiding looking at her, so she starts to worry. "Do I look bad?" She frets, glancing down at her suit. It's navy blue with a sweetheart neckline and some frilly trimming along the hips. Nancy had actually helped her pick it out in an attempt to get to know 'her weird brother's cool girlfriend' better.

"No!" Mike exclaims, "You look good! Really good!"

"Nice save, Wheeler," Max snorts.

"Nice hairdo, Mayfield," Mike counters.

"Lucas did a great job," Max defends, motioning towards her ponytail, to which Lucas smiles modestly.

"Does anyone need any extra sunscreen?" Will interrupts, "My mom packed a ton."

El frowns. "Sunscreen?"

Mike motions for Will to toss him a bottle, so Will does.

"Sunscreen," Mike repeats, showing the bottle to her, "You're definitely gonna need it. It's like a lotion you put on so you don't get a sunburn."

"Sunburn?"

"It's when you stay out in the sun too long and get burned," Dustin replies helpfully, "One time last summer, Mike fell asleep in the sun, and when he woke up his entire back was all shriveled up and peeling and nasty! He looked like Emperor Palpatine!"

"Dude!" Mike exclaims indignantly.

"More like Darth Vader without his helmet," Lucas snickers, "All shriveled up and disgusting."

"Oh my god," Mike mutters as everyone else bursts into laughter, "It wasn't that bad!"

"It kind of was," Will admits.

"I can't believe I missed that!" Max laughs.

"Well, whatever!" Mike huffs, "The point is, sunburns suck, so we gotta make sure you're wearing enough sunscreen."

El quiets her giggles and nods. "Okay!"

As the rest of the Party starts applying their own sunscreen, Mike passes El the bottle.

"You can use it first," he offers.

El hesitates. "Can you help me?"

Mike feels his face grow warm. "Uh, sure!" He replies, voice a little higher than usual.

El smiles gratefully as she hands the bottle back to him. Mike steps closer to her and squirts some of the lotion into his hands. The unmistakable musky, citrusy scent of sunscreen fills the air as Mike gets to work. He gently rubs and massages his hands over El's shoulders, arms, back, and legs. As he works, El watches him with a content sort of fascination.

Her skin is warm beneath his hands, and it doesn't help that Mike already feels like his body is on fire. He can feel that disturbance-in-the-force paranoia starting to come back again.

But Hopper isn't here right now, Mike assures himself. And even if he was, you're not doing anything wrong. Plus, he trusts you. Kind of.

With that in mind, Mike's able to push past his worries more easily.

As he rubs the lotion onto her shoulders, he shyly meets her gaze.

El smiles back at him. "It feels weird," she giggles.

"Weird?"

El nods. "It tickles!"

There's a playful flash in Mike's eyes as he starts to smile mischievously. "Does it?"

El nods again.

With only a singular beat of hesitation, Mike proceeds to lower his hands and start tickling El's stomach and sides. He's never tried this before, but there's always a first time for everything, right?

Thankfully, El's ticklish. *Very* ticklish, if the way she immediately squeals with laughter is any indication.

"M-Mike!" El gasps, squirming in place.

Mike's leaving lotion-y fingerprints all over El's swimsuit, but he could care less. Her laugh is amazing — he's so used to rarely hearing it from her, and now that he has, he doesn't want it to stop.

He eventually does though, only because his hands start to get a little tired and he's kind of worried that El's gonna pass out from how hard she's laughing.

"I c-can't believe you!" El wheezes as Mike laughs.

"Sorry, El!" Mike replies, not sounding very sorry at all (which is perfectly fine, because El isn't at all upset).

El gives him a small smirk as she grabs the sunscreen bottle that Mike set by their feet. "Let me do you," she offers coyly.

"No way!" Mike refuses, taking a few steps back, "You're just going to tickle me!"

"I won't!" El replies innocently. She steps closer to him and gives him

a sweet smile.

"Do you promise?" Mike asks, eyeing her.

"I won't," El replies carefully.

Mike seemingly doesn't catch her choice of wording and turns his back to her. El carefully rubs the sunscreen onto his skin, using the same technique he'd used on her. She has to try her best not to giggle as she bides her time, waiting for Mike to be fully relaxed.

His shoulders begin to slump, his head lolls to the side lazily, and that's when El strikes. She tickles him with deftly wriggling fingers that move all over his back and sides.

"I-I knew it!" Mike exclaims between breathless gasps of laughter.

"Knucklehead!" El teases as she comes around to tickle his stomach.

Mike laughs and squirms under her touch and, in El's opinion, he's never looked more adorable.

Despite El's valiant efforts, Mike still manages to grab her arms and stop her tickles. They're both laughing and out-of-breath as they lock gazes.

It's not really a surprise to anyone when seconds later, Mike and El start kissing. With their faces so close and their hearts bursting with so much love and affection, it's only a matter of who moves in first (El).

El stands on tip-toe to cup his cheeks as their lips meet. Her hands leave giant sunscreen handprints on his face, but neither of them really seem to care.

"Ugh, gross!" Dustin whines, "They're kissing again!"

Mike and El pull away bashfully, their faces both a vibrant shade of crimson.

"When aren't they kissing?" Lucas remarks dryly.

"You guys are being over-dramatic!" Mike huffs, "Besides Lucas, I don't say anything when you and Max kiss!"

"Because we actually know how to get a room!" Lucas contends.

"C'mon guys," Will offers patiently. Though he doesn't say it outright, his tone and reprimanding look say it all.

The guys still remember how distant Mike had been after El left. Sure, Mike never really talked about it, but his efforts to mask his pain hadn't gone entirely unnoticed. If Dustin and Lucas had to choose, they'd definitely rather have Mike be all sappy and gross with El than sad and isolated like he was without her.

"Whatever," Lucas sighs as an unspoken sign of a truce.

"Can we go in the water now?" Dustin pleads, "It's so hot."

"Last one to the water has to kiss Mike!" Max yells suddenly, only half-joking.

There's a collective yelp from the rest of the Party as they take off running. Lucas winds up scooping Max into his arms and carrying her into the water, ignoring her giggled cries of protest.

"Seriously, guys?" Mike sighs, running after them. He makes it to the water last and hurries in, allowing the cool water to engulf him.

They all spend a few moments adjusting to the temperature change as they splash around in the water.

"I missed this!" Lucas sighs contently, lying on his back and swimming in place.

"So did I!" Dustin exclaims gleefully, and with that, he proceeds to dunk Lucas' head right under the water.

Lucas goes under with a gurgled shout of protest. When he comes back up for air, Dustin is speedily swimming away, laughing breathlessly.

"You're dead, Henderson!" Lucas exclaims, a determined smile set on

his face. He moves to swim after Dustin, but that's when Max splashes at Lucas, Lucas tries to splash her back but hits Will, and all hell breaks loose.

Before long, the entire Party is engaged in a full-on splash water. Their shrieks of laughter echo throughout the chasm of the Quarry. El can barely see anything — her eyes are squeezed shut and there's water going into her mouth and up her nose — but she's having the time of her life.

The splash war eventually proceeds into a slightly more organized game of Chicken. El sits atop Mike's shoulders and Will climbs atop Lucas'. Max and Dustin cheer them on the entire time, calling out taunts and describing the action like a pair of sports announcers.

"And El lands a blow right to the bowl cut!" Dustin eagerly narrates as El gives Will a soft nudge.

"It's a wonder Mike's been able to hold her up for so long!" Max adds, "From what our sources tell us, his upper body strength is, and I quote, 'nonexistent!'"

Mike doesn't even bother trying to stop their teasing. Instead, he just focuses his attention on keeping El upright (which is admittedly a pretty strenuous task).

"Now," Dustin continues, "Will's moving in for what could be the final blow and — they're *hugging*?"

Sure enough, El and Will both have their arms outstretched in a semi-uncomfortable hug. They're both laughing while being out-of-breath and smiling conspiratorially.

"You guys are supposed to be fighting!" Max exclaims, smiling incredulously.

"Fighting is overrated!" Will calls back, to which El nods.

Mike and Lucas make eye contact and shrug, seemingly indifferent to the situation.

"We call it a tie!" El announces, patting the back of Will's head

affectionately.

"Fine by me!" Mike shrugs again, proceeding to flip El off his back and into the water.

El falls backward with a shriek of both surprise and delight. Lucas does the same to Will and moments later the pair re-emerges, laughing and sputtering up water.

After the proceeding second splash fight comes and goes, the Party decides to play a game of Marco Polo.

"How do you play?" El asks curiously.

"It's like tag," Mike explains. When El looks only further confused by this, he continues, "One of us will shut our eyes and try to touch someone else, or tag them. They're gonna shout out 'Marco!' and we'll all have to reply 'Polo!' so they can try to hear where we are."

"It's really easy!" Max assures her.

El smiles gratefully. "Okay!"

"Can I be It?" Dustin pleads.

"Sure!" Will shrugs.

The game, just like their attempt at Chicken, occurs without a shortage of mishaps and mischief. As Dustin stumbles around blindly, calling out 'Marco!', the rest of the Party tries to stifle their giggles as they swim away as quietly as possible. At one point, El starts using her powers to make splashes in the water several feet away, leading Dustin off in the wrong direction. This gets a few enthusiastic laughs out of the group before Dustin catches what's going on.

"No cheating, El!" He exclaims, eyes still closed.

"Sorry!" El calls back as the rest of the group nearly keels over from trying so hard not to laugh.

Dustin eventually manages to catch Mike, Mike catches Will, and they all continue to play until everyone gets a chance to be It.

After that, the rest of the time passes by in a series of hazy fragments. It's almost as if El can feel herself making memories as they happen; her mind saves and documents them like mental snapshots. Mike's wet hair in her hands as she slicks it back and playfully points out how 'bitchin' he looks. Dustin showing her how to open her eyes underwater without making it sting. Lucas teaching her how to do cool tricks like making bubble rings. Will helping her search for shimmering cuts of quartz rock at the bottom of the lake.

And Max —

With Max, it's still a little awkward, but it's better. At one point, after the boys start play-fighting, El finds herself cautiously swimming over to the other girl, still curious about what they'd been discussing earlier.

"Hey, El!" Max greets, slicking her hair back. The ponytail Lucas fastened it in has since come unraveled — long, thick strands of red hair hang plastered to Max's head at odd angles. Though she smiles at El, there's no mistaking the brief flash of hesitance that crosses her face.

"Hi, Max," El replies, trying to sound as friendly as possible.

Max chews on her lower lip before continuing. "So, you having fun?"

El smiles and nods. "Yes, but...I wanted to ask you something."

Max looks surprised but pleased at the same time. "Okay!"

El pauses and takes a breath. She feels kind of weird for asking, but her curiosity gets the better of her. "Is this what it's like in California?"

Max's brow crinkles in confusion but shrugs it off a moment later. "I mean, kind of. The beaches are way bigger than this and there's actual sand, not dirt. Back where I used to live, there was this Boardwalk that ran along the beach — it had all these shops and restaurants and games you could play and stuff."

El listens with rapt fascination, her interest growing with each description.

"But, one thing that does suck is that there was always so many people. I like that it's just us today, we don't need any more dweebs bothering us."

El nods in wholehearted agreement. "We don't."

"Hey, Max!" Dustin calls over, "You wanna water arm-wrestle?"

Max eyes him. "There's no such thing as water arm-wrestling!" She calls back.

"Yes, there is! I just beat Lucas in it!"

"Bullshit, you did!" Lucas balks as Mike and Will burst out laughing.

"Alright, alright!" Max exclaims as she starts to swim over to the guys, "Don't lose your shit."

El follows Max back to the others. She watches a few slippery, disastrous rounds of water arm-wrestling before it starts to hit her just how tired she is. They have to have been in the water for hours now and this is definitely more activity than El's used to.

Mike sees El looking a little down. He meets her gaze and as she turns to him with an adorably tired little pout, he realizes that she probably needs a break.

"We're gonna be right back guys," he announces as he swims over to El.

"O-Okay!" Dustin huffs, currently arm-wrestling Lucas again.

While the rest of their friends continue to splash around, Mike and El return to the beach towels sprawled out on the earthy shore.

Their towels are lying side-by-side. As Mike stretches out on his back, El digs into her beach bag and pulls out a pen and the *TV Guide* she brought. Mike watches with mild amusement as she proceeds to lie on her back and flip through the channel listings, circling the showtimes for her favorite soap operas.

El can feel Mike's eyes on her, so she glances at him defensively. "I

don't want to miss them," she states.

"Of course," Mike nods quickly.

"The last episode landed on a clothes hanger."

"Cliffhanger."

"Cliffhanger."

The sun continues to beam down on them. Water droplets trail down their skin, either falling off into the towel or evaporating in the summer heat. Mike watches the water as it drips off the ends of El's hair and the tip of her nose. The water on her legs shimmers in the afternoon sun, catching the light in a way that seems almost magical.

"You look like a mermaid," Mike says without thinking.

El blushes and glances at him warily. "What?"

Mike can feel himself start to blush too. "You just look really pretty, is all."

El smiles shyly. "Thank you." She returns her attention back to the magazine but ultimately decides that she's had enough of it for now. Mike is far more interesting than whenever *As the World Turns* is playing next, which isn't even one of El's favorites.

She sets the magazine aside and crawls over to his beach towel. Mike looks surprised as El lies on top of him, resting her chin on his chest and intertwining their legs together.

"You're warm," El hums happily, wrapping her arms around him.

"You're getting me soaking wet," Mike jokes, not unkindly.

"I'm protecting you," El teases, "So you won't look like Darth Vader without his helmet."

"Gee, thanks," Mike replies dryly.

El laughs at his unamused expression. Mike continues to pout, so she

peppers a few kisses across his chest, easily soothing him.

Mike wraps his arms around her waist, holding her close to him. "You're so mean to me," he says in a whiny, nasally voice that causes El to laugh harder.

"Because you're a dummy!" El jokes, nudging her nose against his chin.

Mike smiles up at her. He looks so beautiful right now, with water droplets caught on his eyelashes and his hair a wonderfully curly mess. El almost wants to pinch herself because there's no way he can be real. There's no way she's gotten someone as beautifully wonderful as Mike to love her.

Mike moves one of his hands from her waist to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. "So, how are you liking summer so far?" He asks softly.

El gives him a small smile. "It's good," she replies, "It's better."

"Better than?"

El bites down on her lower lip. "Than being back there."

Mike doesn't have to ask where *there* is. He knows that she's not fond of talking about it, but his curiosity gets the better of him. "Didn't they ever let you outside?"

El glances down. "Only a few times. Pa — *Brenner* would let me stand in this fenced-in place sometimes. I got to see the trees."

Mike frowns worriedly. It sounds like she was some kind of prisoner or something.

Because that's exactly what she was, his mind reminds him.

"Well, don't worry," Mike says as reassuringly as possible, "You're free now and you can do whatever you want! This is going to be the best summer ever!"

El nods, though she still feels a little despondent. While it's true that

she's free now, a part of her still feels trapped by her own shortcomings. She wants to be caught up with all the other kids, but with every day in the real world, it seems like she's only learning more ways in which she's behind.

Cliffhanger, sunscreen, California—

California. From the way Max described it, it sounds like the epitome of summer. The word lingers in El's mind like a tantalizing offer, like it held one missing piece of the puzzle that was her life as of late.

Mike can tell that something's up. "What are you thinking about?" He murmurs.

El hesitates before mumbling, "I want to go to California."

Mike eyes her curiously. "Why?"

El averts her gaze, her voice starting to waver with frustration. "I just want to. I want to see the waves, and the sand, and the surfing, and hunt for shells, and get a sunburn, and see the Boardwalk, a-and—"

She's speaking faster and clenching her fists tighter as she speaks. Nearby fragments of rock are starting to hover in the air around them, so Mike quickly reaches out to cup her cheeks in a soothing action.

"Hey, hey, hey!" He murmurs, "It's okay!"

El meets his gaze with an embarrassed sort of smile. There's a soft clatter as the surrounding rock shards fall back to the ground. "I'm sorry," she mumbles.

"Don't be sorry," Mike insists, stroking his thumbs over her cheeks, "You want to see the world, I get it."

El nods, shoulders slumping in relief. *Mike gets it.* Even back when she'd only been able to speak a few words, he'd always understood exactly what she meant.

"Well, we will," Mike continues confidently, "Once we're older and I have a car."

El's eyes widen with a hint of doubt. "Really?"

Mike nods seriously. "We will. I'll get a job and save up money so we can go and everything."

El's gaze softens. His voice is so reassuring, so certain, she can't help but believe him. She lowers her head and tucks it under Mike's chin, snuggling against him as she closes her eyes. "What will we do?" She whispers.

As El cuddles him, Mike begins to run his fingers through her hair. "We'll take a road trip," he murmurs, "We'll stop in every state along the way, and you'll get to see all those weird tourist traps and roadside attractions and stuff. And we can stop at diners for waffles whenever you want."

El gives a small hum of contentment, so Mike continues.

"Once we're in California, we'll stay at a place right on the beach, so you can wake up and see the waves every morning. We'll go swimming in the ocean, and build sandcastles, and bury each other in the sand."

El pulls her head back so she can crinkle her nose at him. "*Bury* each other?" She giggles.

"Not all the way!" Mike smiles back, "You keep your head out, obviously. It's fun."

"Oh." El smiles before giving Mike a hopeful look. "Then what?"

Mike continues to run his fingers through her hair. It's getting so much longer and curlier now — it's becoming weird to think that there was a time where El didn't look like this, where they weren't together like this all the time. "We'll stay on the beach all day. We can have a picnic and everything. When the sun goes down, we can just lie back on the sand and watch the sunset. It'll be really pretty and stuff too."

El closes her eyes and imagines herself lying with Mike as she is now, stretched out on white sand with the bluest water she's ever seen on the horizon. The sky's awash with pinks, purples, and oranges, and

most importantly she's happy — exactly like she is right now.

El keeps her eyes closed, wanting to hold onto that imaginary moment for a little longer. "I want that," she whispers, even though she knows Mike already gets that.

"You'll have that," Mike assures her.

El opens her eyes to meet his gaze. "Do you promise?"

Mike doesn't look away. "I promise."

El feels her heart swell in her chest. It feels like it's ready to burst — like it can't handle the sheer amount of love she has for Mike right now. It's not used to all this, it's too much.

But then Mike closes the distance between them with a kiss, and El realizes if her heart really is about to give out, dying in Mike's arms wouldn't be the absolute worst thing ever.

Lucas and Dustin start calling out teasingly to them from the water, but Mike doesn't pull away from El and only raises his hand to flip them off. Max and Will get a good laugh out of that, and even El giggles against Mike's lips.

After a few moments, El pulls back again to look Mike in the eye. "I want you," she says simply.

"You have me," Mike assures her, "You have me and we're gonna see the whole world together, El, and I'm never going to leave you again."

Mike doesn't have say 'promise' that for El to know it's true.